

Prayer and Guidance, Acts 1, May 16<sup>th</sup> 2021.

Also John 17:6-end.

Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way that you have seen him go into heaven.”

Jesus had ascended. What to do now?

What would you have done?

The Angels words confirm that the Lord has truly ascended – it is not like the previous 40 days, when he would appear, then disappear and then reappear.

What they do. They return to Jerusalem, the kilometer or so walk, around 20 minutes, to the house where they were staying. Luke tells us a little of what happened over the next 10 days.

In his Gospel – he says ‘they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.’ And in Acts, ‘they all joined together constantly in prayer.’ A healthy combination – continuous praise in the temple, and continuous prayer in the home.

The group who met together was large - 120 at times – roughly the size of All Saints if we were able to gather together – and diverse. The apostle, but also the women who had followed and served since the days of the Galilee ministry, Jesus brothers and also his mother Mary. This group ‘joined together constantly in prayer.’

It was a 10 day prayer and praise meeting – but you know, Jesus had never told them how long to wait for – so they started and it is suggested, they would keep on going until the Spirit came...

Prayer.

In our bibles it says ‘joined together’ – the Greek word used here, means ‘with a single mind’ or ‘united in heart and mind’. And it is not only here we see unity in this first days of this first community of Jesus followers. We see this theme – like a golden thread in Acts.

Acts 4 – ‘All the believers were one in heart and mind, no one claimed that any of his possessions were his own, but they shared everything they had.’ Unity which led into practical action. Again when the next layer of leadership is appointed – the 7 – in Acts 6, ‘this proposal pleased the whole group.’ And in Acts 15:25, at the Jerusalem Council, “So we all agreed” Unity in decision making.

And unity in prayer. After Peter and John were arrested, threatened, the church gathers with them in Acts 4 we hear: ‘When they heard the report, they raised their voices in prayer together in prayer to God.’ Unity in prayer – what they began they continued. Jesus prayer in John 17 – that these disciples would be one – is already being worked out... and unity wasn’t just a nice feeling, it was shown.

And how they prayed.

It says ‘joined ... constantly’ – proskartereo – it means to be persistent, or continually devoting yourself. Luke uses the same word when he says the new converts after Pentecost, ‘devoted themselves’ to the apostles teaching in Acts 2. And the apostles say, in Acts 6, they will devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word. Paul later uses this same word when he encourages the believers in Roman 12:12 ‘Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.’ Faithful or continually devoted to prayer. And in

Colossians 4 as he writes from a prison he says : “Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.’ This is where the word ‘prevailing prayer’ comes from.

This commitment to prayer is another thread through Acts. Prayer is mentioned 31 times in Acts and it appears in 20 of its chapters. Paul’s letters are soaked in calls to pray, and words of his own prayers and his desire they pray for him. Simply walking through Acts 1-6 it is regularly described— Acts 1 we are in, Acts 2, the new church is committed to prayer, Acts 3 – Peter and John on the way to the temple to pray, Acts 4 the church pray together, Acts 6 – the apostles appoint others to allow them to concentrate on prayer and also when they appoint these new leaders, they are done so in and with prayer.

So what are we do with this. All sounds very nice. Glasses. Have you ever thought your glasses were clean and they were totally not? How many times do I think my glasses are clean – then I take them off and I go, wow where did all that come from. I clean them and suddenly – clearer. Acts can be like that. We get used to how things are. That is how church is. But we meditate and think about this early community and we like get our glasses clean – that is how a community can be...

Unity shown in action – in decision, in practical care, in prayer. Prayer that is persevering. For 10 days and they did not know when to stop.

What were they praying for? Could it have been for the Spirit to come? Jesus had promised them that he would send the Spirit soon – he had commanded them to wait in the city until He came and then to begin their witness. Luke does seem to tell us – how did they prepare for the Spirit to come – praise and prayer?

And in Luke 11 – Jesus when he taught about prayer, said they could ask for the Spirit.

Promises of God became a focus for their praying. It has been said that how to intercede: get informed – know really really know what you are praying for, get passionate – just read out the psalms these things matter, prayer is not bringing a shopping list to him of things we don’t really care that much about, deep down, get in sync – praying with others (a regular part of church life since church began as we just saw, and shown today in prayer rooms, 24-7 prayer and other weekly or monthly gatherings), and get engaged with God’s word. Jonathan Edwards wrote: “That which God makes abundantly clear the subject of his promises, God’s people should abundantly make the subject of their prayers.” That our prayer times are not only bringing our needs but we also take God’s promises, his agenda and praying them for individuals and situations.”

Writer and minister Matthew Henry - when God wants to do something special in the world, he first gets his people to start praying.

In the 1850s, for example, the United States was in a weak spiritual state, as people were preoccupied with concern for material things. In 1857 a quiet forty-six-year-old businessman, Jeremiah Lanphier, felt led to start a noon-time weekly prayer meeting in New York City, in which business people could meet for prayer. Anyone could attend, for a few minutes or for the entire hour.

On the first day Lanphier prayed alone for half an hour. But by the end of the hour six men from at least four denominational backgrounds had joined him. Twenty came the next week and forty the week after.

Soon they decided to meet daily, and the group swelled to over one hundred. Pastors who came started morning prayer meetings in their own churches. Soon similar meetings were being held all over America.

Within six months there were more than ten thousand meetings daily in New York City alone. This was the start of what is now termed “The Great Awakening” in North America. It is estimated that in a two-year period (1857–1859), two million people were led to Christ (out of a population of thirty million).

The prayer that took place in Jerusalem was united and persistent.<sup>1</sup>

### **Guidance.**

‘In those days Peter stood up among the believers’. He shares the need for a new apostle to replace Judas.

Where did the idea come from? “It is clear that he was led to do so by the Lord as a result of the deep prayers of the faithful.”<sup>2</sup>

It is possible to read this chapter and suggest, this was simply the plan all along. Well. One question would be – why did Jesus not appoint a new apostle over those 40 days? It does not appear to have been an item of discussion. So was this an idea, or did something grow in Peter over those days of prayer, as he read and heard the psalms and then he shared his suggestion.

This is a reminder. That prayer gatherings are not at times, simply about making our plans and asking God to bless them. We can be sensitive to what God is doing in us as we pray, individually or corporately. What is he shaping in us. Someone said – go where your best prayers lead you – what are you passionately praying for, is the Lord inviting you also to be part of that answer? I think at times it is a mystery. Sometimes an idea clearly comes to mind and that is it. Other times, it grows, it takes shape over days weeks of pray... I suggest that is what is going on with Peter.

In these verses I think we can see 6 elements to guidance. Circumstantial Signs. Commanding Scripture, Common Sense. Counsel of the Saints. Clear Prayer. Compelling Spirit.

**Circumstantial Signs.** Or you could call this events. Through what happened with Judas – his betrayal and subsequent suicide – the number of the apostles is now one less. There is a painful absence among them – you can hear that in the words – “he was one of our number and shared in this ministry”. I don’t think this is a CV description. Three years together. Eat food. Laughed. Were amazed at what Jesus was doing. He was sent out as one of the 12 ahead of Jesus and so on. He didn’t just swap sides. He betrayed the person they were following.

This event – this circumstance – may have been what was going on in Peter’s minds and the minds of others. A circumstance can be start of a process and God can use to guide.

Peter then points to **commanding scripture**. He tells the story. He goes to Psalm 69. This psalm expresses what has happened he feels. Jesus also had quoted from Psalm 69 in John 2 and 15. Let the one who persecutes his place be gone, he has to go. Secondly. Psalm 109 – another enemy is mentioned in that psalm and his place should be empty, he should be gone, but also be replaced. Scripture gives the

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<sup>1</sup> Fernando, A. (1998). [Acts](#) (pp. 80–81). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

<sup>2</sup> Osborne, G. R. (2019). [Acts: Verse by Verse](#) (p. 30). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

guidance and they see in it, prophecy through David by the Spirit, of what happened with Judas and what is to happen next. Scripture. The place where God has spoken. Remember we read the word we are not simply perusing the words of Paul or Jeremiah like we would read the words of Churchill.

We listen to what God has spoken – all scripture is God breathed – but we also, like Peter, listen to what God is speaking now, to us, through scripture.

**Common Sense.** Peter uses it. If Judas is to be replaced, if this substitute is to have the same apostolic ministry as Peter ETC, then he must also have the same qualifications. He has been with them since John the Baptist and until the events from a few days before of Jesus ascension. This is sound deductive reasoning.

**Counsel of the saints.** The community – it is 120 present – they listen to the idea. They are in agreement we see – there needs to be a replacement. They agree with the words of Peter. They agree to his discernment in God's word, what God has said and what he is speaking now. They agree with the categories needed – the qualifications. And they propose two people – Joseph and Matthias. We see this process very similarly in Acts 6. There is a problem – or an event – circumstance – the widows are not being fed. Scripture is present – in the OT vision of developing leadership when main leadership is stretched – see Moses and Jethro in Exodus 18, as well as the need to help those in need – widows, orphans foreigners etc. Common sense – as to the number of people needed – 7 and their qualities – wisdom and full of the Spirit. And again there is the counsel of the saints, they listen, discern, agree with the proposal and propose 7 men. Decisions can involve other believers in discerning – are things correct, or is the goal right but process wrong etc.

**Clear Prayer.** They have two great candidates. But as the Lord Jesus had appointed his first apostles, so they ask the Lord again to do so. They choose an OT method – lots – but they clearly know that humanly they cannot choose, the Lord knows the heart, the core of who they are and who is right – as the Lord knows what will come to each apostle in the years ahead and what pressures they will face and opportunities they will have before them. Jesus spent the night in prayer before choosing his twelve apostles (Luke 6:12–13). In Luke-Acts, as Robert Stein points out, “prayer preceded every major decision or crisis in the life of Jesus and the early church.”<sup>3</sup> They seek God's direction.

Finally **Compelling Spirit.** This may be a weird one. The Spirit has not been given. True. I'd would suggest we see pointers. Scripture he helped form. And now he illuminates to Peter. And the suggestion, where did this original plan, proposal come from... Of course, the Spirit, as we read this dynamic story we see many places where the Spirit much more directly push, guides closes. Acts 8 Philip told to go near the chariot of the Ethiopian eunuch. Acts 10 – after the vision from heaven, Peter told to go with the Roman soldiers and the Gentiles receive the baptism of the Spirit. Acts 13, Antioch told – in prayer and worship – to set aside Paul and Barnabas and so begins the missionary journeys; Acts 16 the Spirit who stops Paul and the team preaching in two parts of Turkey, until the Macedonia vision is given.

So we see a number of factors which contributed to the discovery of God's will. There was the circumstance – one apostles is gone; commanding scripture – a replacement should be made; common sense as to the qualifications to replace him for someone like them; counsel of the saints – the plan, proposal discerned and agreed and then two individuals proposed; then clear prayer – Jesus was gone but

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<sup>3</sup> Fernando, A. (1998). [Acts](#) (p. 80). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

he was till accessible to them by prayer, and they sought his appointment. And compelling spirit – quietly at work in the prayer gathering, to illuminate scripture and probably having worked in the hearts of the community as well, to shape this process. 6 elements which are ways and a combination the Lord can guide us today.

To finish with words from John Stott as we look forward to next Sunday...

“The stage is now set for the Day of Pentecost. The apostles have received Christ’s commission and seen his ascension. The apostolic team is complete again, ready to be his chosen witnesses.

Only one thing is missing – the Spirit has not yet come to them individually. Though the place left vacant by Judas has been filled by Matthias, the place left vacant by Jesus has not yet been filled by the Spirit. So we leave Luke’s first chapter of the Acts with the 120 waiting in Jerusalem, persevering in prayer with one heart and mind, poised ready to fill Christ’s command, just as soon as he has fulfilled his promise.” John Stott Acts p59.

**Prayer... We join our prayers with others for the Spirit to come...**

God of power,  
may the boldness of your Spirit transform us,  
may the gentleness of your Spirit lead us,  
may the gifts of your Spirit equip us  
to serve and worship you now and always.

Come, Holy Spirit, renew your wonders in this our day—as it was on the day of Pentecost. Amen.